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Crossing the Bar

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CROSSING THE BAR

A LYRIC OF LIFE
EVERLASTING

BY
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A LYRIC OF LIFE EVERLASTING

FOR human beings like ourselves, dependent, finite, and frail, the question of the life everlasting must always remain in the sphere of moral faith. Even if it were proved, as it may very well be some day, that death in no way impairs the vitality and force of the human soul, even then the endless continuance of life would not thereby be demonstrated. For the endless years that stretch on before us have countless possibilities within them to a finite and dependent existence; and all we can say is this, that we shall live as long as He wills on whom

we are finally dependent for our existence. That seems to me the first clear, authentic, and satisfying position on this mysterious question.

We do not create ourselves; we are not the authors, nor are we in the final account the supporters of our own being. The duration of our life rests with Him upon whom we are absolutely dependent for our being. God and God's will are the ultimate resting-place of our souls. Therefore on this subject we turn away from the world of scientific proof to the world of moral faith, from the sphere of demonstration to the sphere of moral and human values. We believe in God; we believe in the perfection of His intelligence, in the perfec-

tion of His moral being; He is light without darkness and love without limit. That is our fundamental belief, and He has made us so that we value above everything else in the world a great and true intellect, a great and true character. These values transcend all others that we know.

For example, here is this poet, Tennyson. Consider his mind, how observant it was, how discriminating, how rich in its perceptions, how fertile in its thoughts, how gifted in its imaginations, how splendid in its expression. Here is a mind endowed with poetic genius, a mind that moves among words with a diviner's charm, that selects from these words those that sing, and builds

these world-melodies into a great structure of music, into a vast world of art, and through that world of art enables the deep and sacred things of the human soul to speak, and speak with power. The intelligence of this poet was the creation of God; this wonder so high, so fine, came from the Infinite intelligence. Has that finite intellect so rare, so brilliant, so wonderful, no permanent value for God? That is the question.

But Tennyson was not only a great mind: he was a great character. He stood in the presence of the noble tragedy of the world, and felt in all its tides the presence and purpose and directive power of the Divine life. He stood in

awe in the presence of the moral order in human existence; in its nobilities and in its wreckage alike he saw God. He became a lover of mankind,—the special love for his parents, his brothers, his kindred, his friends, and those who stood round him in the great communion of vision and of service ran out a river of life to the whole human race. He became the lover of his kind. Humanity had a value for him, and he stood in his heavenly vision as a servant of the higher needs of that humanity, begging to serve men and to serve them forever. Had this character, so fine, so clean, so just, so great, no value for God? It seems to us that this character was a grace wafted from the

sphere of the Spirit into time; and on the boughs of this man's life a blossom appeared from the God in whom his being was rooted. Has that consummate flower no value for the Most High?

This subject is for me bathed in the utmost tenderness. The most impressive and by far the richest service connected with the beginning of my ministry in this church[1] was the service on Friday evening, March 7, 1884, when I was received into its membership. I can see again the well-filled chapel and the company of strong and noble men, of beautiful and devoted women, families on whose hearts rested the welfare of this church, most of whom have long since

[1] The Old South Church, Boston

vanished from our sight. I can see again the eager and noble interest in their faces; I note again the silence, so deep and so moving, as I rose to speak in simplest words the few fundamental things of my faith; and I feel again the response that came as I pledged myself in service to them. I see them rise to welcome me, and I hear the words spoken over us: "The Lord bless you, and keep you: The Lord make His face shine upon you, and be gracious unto you: The Lord lift up His countenance upon you, and give you peace." And after the song of praise and the benediction, I receive again the noble greeting of that noble band of Christian men and women. They were the

strength and the hope of this church then; they were the treasure and the inspiration of their own homes then; they are now a precious memory to all who knew them, and such a memory they will ever remain. Whither have they gone? They have vanished from our sight. This world of value which they represent, a world of value to us, has it no value for God? Did He care nothing for that which was so precious to us? Thus you see we are led by our questions concerning the dead back to God; in Him we live, and move, and have our being; upon Him we are dependent for every breath that we draw; for life, for strength, for all things; our be-

ing comes up out of His will; it is sustained in existence moment by moment through the presence and power of His will. He is the author, He is the supporter of our being, and upon His character and disposition toward us rests all our hope for this day and for all days. In life and in death we are the Lord's, and what our future is to be depends upon His will.

Who, then, is God? What is God? That is the great question of faith. By what means shall we read the character of the being in whose hands are the destinies of all souls? How great and grave a question that is! How it recalls us from the petty things that exercise and divide the Christian Church! How trivial

and miserable seem these questions that engross religious men so often, and that divide them, in the presence of the great question, Who is God and what is He in His inmost character? Everything comes back to that; our whole hope or despair depends upon our answer to that question.

How shall we read the heart of the Eternal? We read it through what is best in ourselves. We say it is He that hath made us, not we ourselves. When our souls are at their best, as we love our children, as we love our kindred, as that primitive, instinctive, divinely inspired love runs out into a great vision and a great passion and a great service for mankind, we take ourselves at

our best and we say, this heart at its best did not make itself; it is the bloom of another heart, the pulse of another being is in it. God is greater than our heart at its best, and we read the loving God through the love that He has given us as our best treasure. We go further and assemble a mighty host out of all peoples and kindreds and tongues in all time who have had the vision of good and the love for it and who have stood in darkness and in light in the service of that heavenly vision. We take this host, that no man can number, at its best; we take it in its inspired moments, when it has climbed to the highest altitudes of its humanity; and again through this humanity that did

not make itself, that has been inspired out of the Infinite, we read the heart of the Eternal. Behind this host with its great soul of honor is the soul of God who made it.

Thus we come to the supreme individual existence in the life of mankind—Jesus. He at His divine height did not make himself; He has a God and a Father essential to the explanation of His being. Truly He says, "He that hath seen me hath seen the Father." Jesus in the glory of His intelligence, in the love and beauty of His heart, in the awe and majesty of His conscience, in the power and the triumph of His good will is an expression of the being, the infinite being in the

eternal world who brought Him hither and who sustained Him in His service for man.

Through ourselves at our best, through our race at its best, through the Lord and Master of mankind at His divine altitude we read the character of God, we call Him Our Father, our infinite Friend, and face to face with His moral perfection, with His eternal compassion, we say the world that is precious to us is precious to Him. The mother with her infant slipping from her arms into the shadow of death feels that her sense of the inexpressible value of that life is but a reflex of God's sense of its inexpressible value. We bring our whole human world, with all its

values, with all its tenderness, with all its preciousness, and with all its mystery, and we lay it down and say, We risk everything here! Oh, how deep, how vast, how solemn, how grand, and how infinitely dear it is to us! And we believe, O Thou infinite God, that our world, so dear to us, is still infinitely more dear to Thee, and Thou wilt keep that which we commit to Thee against all the days and all the years!

There is our faith in immortality. Marcus Aurelius said, "It is good to die if there be gods and sad to live if there be none!" All our work, if isolated from faith in the ultimate character of the universe, is doomed to disappointment, to weariness, to

dust, and to ashes at the end. The first article in all faith that is to live and lift humanity and fill our human homes and our human hearts with hope is this: "The eternal God is thy dwelling-place, and underneath are the everlasting arms."

Now this is the atmosphere in which Tennyson wrote all his poems about the life after death. He had a world of values, and he believed that the world of values for man is a world of values for God. No poet, either in ancient or in modern times, has brooded so upon the life after death as Tennyson has done; no poet has brought into existence so many extraordinary expressions of our Christian faith in

the life beyond the veil. What a monument *In Memoriam* is to faith, to music, to insight; to the presentation by the poet to God of the vast and tragic world of man for His love and for His protection! *In Memoriam* is, however, only one of the many expressions by Tennyson of this faith in the endless worth of man. His poem, *Vastness*, is another and one of the most impressive, and here and there slighter pieces contain deep insights, like that exquisite lyric, *Wages;* but I pass by all these tempting appeals and come to that song which is in your memory now, and will be in the memory of our race so long as men believe in the hereafter, so long as they strive

to overcome death by faith in God.

I ask you to note the structure of this song. It is a kind of desecration to analyze a lyric like this, yet there may be some justification for the analysis if it shall make this song, so significant to feeling, equally significant to thought; for great poetry understood gains in power upon the heart. There is one main figure running through the lyric, and the main figure is supported by secondary figures of exquisite meaning, a whole world of thought coming out in a single word or phrase. The thought of the poem, as you know, is the passage of a soul from the time-world into the Eternal—the passage of the poet

himself from the time-world into the Eternal; from the sense-world, with its richness, its color, its music, its charm, out into the vast, bare, sublime, invisible; and the main figure under which that thought is presented is the mariner putting out to sea. Tennyson had often seen the great ships passing the Isle of Wight in the dusk of evening. Here we take his secondary figure — the time — the sunset; and what does that mean? The light of the human world is gone; the evening star, that pulse of fire, is a visitation from the Eternal when from the dying man the human world has receded. "One clear call for me!" — the great cry of the ship before the voyage begins;

and that most tender warning, which we all have heard — "All ashore that are going ashore! All ashore that are going ashore! All ashore!"

Then comes another of these secondary figures: "May there be no moaning of the bar" — uncontrolled regret, wild grief, hysteria are out of place; the transaction is high, majestic; the dying man is in grand company and therefore such things must not be, and here we think of Socrates in the hour of death as he rebukes the impious sorrow of his disciples.

Then there is the final figure of the first two stanzas, the tide, which is still secondary, and yet becomes in a way primary, —

When that which drew from out the
boundless deep
Turns again home.

The tide at the landing is the same as the tide in the heart of the sea. And human life is kindred with God; birth is but the shoreward sweep of the tidal life of God, and death is but the seaward sweep of that same tidal life of God.

Passing now to the second stanza, we still have the main figure of the mariner, supported by exquisite secondary figures. "Twilight and evening bell"—the ship has really started on her way; you are no longer on land; you are on the sea; you hear the bell from the forecastle or from the stern peal out its eight notes.

"Twilight and evening bell"—you know where you are; all not going have gone ashore; your friends are all behind you now; no voice can now be heard from the land.

And then that next phrase, which seems to me one of the deepest in the whole poem: "And after that the dark!"—the ship is speeding onward under a black heaven and over a black sea, lonely, casting no shadow, and the whole dear human world is irrecoverably gone. "And after that the dark!"—the infinite dark, the untraveled universe fronting the soul in majestic gloom, the deep dusk as it wears the shadow of the eternal. Here the poet returns in concern regarding the

manner of the human world toward him:

> And may there be no sadness of farewell,
> When I embark.

There must be no inordinate grief, no outpouring of compassion for the departed, no hopeless, broken-hearted mourning. Why?

> For tho' from out our bourne of Time and Place —

this sense-world, this time-world, this space-world —

> For tho' from out our bourne of Time and Place
> The flood may bear me far,

(oh, how far — God only knows how far!)

> I hope to see my Pilot face to face
> When I have crost the bar.

Yes! it is forever true that here

we see in a mirror, darkly; but then, face to face.

It is my hope that these analyses of the main figure and the supporting figures in this immortal lyric may make it more significant and more dear to some hearts. May I now ask you to follow it without remark, without the sacrilege of explanation, without the indignity of any comment whatsoever? Here it moves in its flawless perfection:

Sunset and evening star,
And one clear call for me!
And may there be no moaning of the bar,
When I put out to sea,

But such a tide as moving seems asleep,
Too full for sound and foam,
When that which drew from out the boundless deep
Turns again home.

Twilight and evening bell,
And after that the dark!
And may there be no sadness of farewell,
When I embark;

For tho' from out our bourne of Time and Place
The flood may bear me far,
I hope to see my Pilot face to face
When I have crost the bar.

Read again the account of Tennyson's own death. On that October midnight, with the full moon riding in splendor and shedding upon sea and land a light more beautiful than the sun, he lay in his own room in his famous home, like breathing marble, full of dignity and full of peace. He asked his doctor what it meant. Death? To the affirmative answer of his doctor he replied, "It is well." There

he lay with a copy of Shakespeare in his hand, with the page turned down in *Cymbeline* at his favorite line, "Hang there like fruit, my soul, till the tree die!" and as the poet passed, his son read over him in death from the great Ode to the Duke of Wellington, these words of faith:

On God and Godlike men we build our trust.
Hush, the Dead March wails in the people's ears:
The dark crowd moves, and there are sobs and tears:
The black earth yawns: the mortal disappears;
Ashes to ashes, dust to dust;
He is gone who seem'd so great. —
Gone; but nothing can bereave him
Of the force he made his own
Being here, and we believe him
Something far advanced in State,
And that he wears a truer crown

Than any wreath that man can weave him.
Speak no more of his renown,
Lay your earthly fancies down,
And in the vast cathedral leave him,
God accept him, Christ receive him!

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